

Wanderings

Karl Detzer

[Originally appeared in the *Reader's Digest*, October 1950]

I sat that last night in October of 1950 with my father, August Detzer, age 96 years, and we knew that the end had come, my memory kept slipping backward to my boyhood and the stories he had told of his youth.

On the day he was born at Defiance, Ohio, April 11, 1854, George Washington had been dead only 55 years, and there were men in the village who had seen the first president, face to face. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had died just 28 years before. Victoria was young Queen of England and Louis Napoleon the Emperor of France.

There were only 31 states in the Union. Irving, Holmes, Long fellow and Lowell were writing for the magazines. The Light Brigade made its charge in the Crimean war the next year; Commodore Perry had just opened the door to Japan ; the New York Central Railroad, New York to Albany, was only three years old.

My grandfather was a pioneering missionary, a sturdy Lutheran who carried the Faith in a deep Bavarian accent along the mud roads of Ohio

and Indiana and on to frontier villages in the forests of Minnesota territory. In his old age, as I remember him, he looked like a bust of Martin Luther that stood on a shelf in my uncle's drug store, his face deep lined, mouth long and firm, eyes alert for the first sign of irreverence. He was short and squarely built and wore a long black coat and purple vest with white collar reversed, a purple skull cap and in his ears plain rings of gold.

In my father's youth he lived on the site of Anthony Wayne's old Fort Defiance where the Maumee and Auglaise rivers meet. The Wabash and Erie canal . . . "the Gateway to the West" . . . passed the preacher's little house and my father as a boy swung on the canal lock gates as they opened and closed. There still was considerable of Wayne's old wilderness fort to be seen and the boys played in the trenches and climbed the rotten log palisades.

Life must have been hard but his stories were of the fun he had, of adventures in the woods, hunting the family cow, Rosie, which was forever getting lost. Winters were long and in

the mornings the children's coverlets were white with snow that seeped in through chinks in the walls.

On the day the dreadful news came to Defiance that President Lincoln had died, April 14, 1865, my father was eleven years old. He climbed to the belfry of his father's little church and sat all day, tolling the melancholy bell while he wept for the plain man who had saved the Union.

When he was 18 and working in a drug store in Fort Wayne, word came that Chicago was burning and that General Phil Sheridan was trying to stop the fire with dynamite. My father, on the next train, arrived in time to see General Phil's explosions halt the fire. Three years later in Philadelphia he saw two things that skeptical men back home refused to believe.

In a great exposition building all the lights in the room flashed on at the same time, in the first public demonstration of electric light. And in that room, if you spoke into a little box, a person at the other end of the room with another box could hear your voice. A scientist named Alexander Hell was demonstrating a new invention called the telephone.

My father crossed the Atlantic in 14 days which was five weeks shorter than the trip his father made. And now I've had tea of a Monday evening

in Glasgow, Scotland, and breakfast next morning on New York's 42nd Street.

When he had his own drug store my father was anxious to bring to Fort Wayne the wonders he had seen, so when fifty men were needed to put in the first telephones he was one of them. His store also shone with the first electric lights although I remember that we had gas lights at home. He also was the first druggist in Indiana to put in a soda fountain, a risky thing to do in those days when the tanks of carbonated water had a habit of blowing up.

In London he saw Gladstone and heard Disraeli debate. He sat in the high gallery and heard Irving and Booth play Hamlet and on her last "return engagement," heard Jenny Lind. When I was 12 years old he took me to see Joe Jefferson as Rip Van Winkle.

These were some of my memories that last, long night. And they reminded me that we are indeed a young nation when in one man's life he can play in the pits Mad Anthony Wayne had dug, can toll the bell for Lincoln's death and yet ask, in a tired old voice, for the latest news from Korea.